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Leavitt addresses health IT commission

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BETHESDA, MD — The American public needs a clear picture of the benefits of electronic health records and information technology's potential in healthcare, HHS Secretary Michael Leavitt told a federal advisory body Tuesday.

Leavitt, who was joined by National Health Information Technology Coordinator David J. Brailer, MD, told the Commission on Systemic Interoperability that consumers need a better understanding of the government's vision to create a National Health Information Infrastructure.

"What is absent from this discussion is a clear, unambiguous picture of what this will look like," Leavitt said.

The Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 created the 11-member commission, which is charged with advising Congress and President Bush on a strategy for adopting and implementing healthcare technology standards. The commission by the end of October will release a report on its recommendations.

Leavitt said the commission also should make privacy issues a top priority when formulating its recommendations, warning that failure to do so could derail the group's efforts. A recent survey showed that Americans are divided about the benefits of electronic health records and are concerned about the privacy of their medical information.

"It is my personal motto to put privacy at the forefront of this conversation," he said.

Leavitt also said he is interested in "near-term deliverables" from the commission. This might include helping to create a system that allows Medicare beneficiaries to be given the option to share a record of their prescription drugs with their physicians when they sign up for the new Medicare prescription drug benefit, Leavitt suggested.

The commission is still trying to determine what recommendations it will make to the government on ways to modernize the healthcare system. Although the group plans to consider all stakeholders' roles in developing an interoperable healthcare system, on Tuesday it focused on consumers' role in spurring healthcare IT adoption.

The commission heard from Peggy Frank, whose daughter Ashley was born with a genetic mutation. Frank told commissioners about the myriad doctors who have treated her daughter and the numerous hospitalizations and surgeries she has undergone. Frank said electronic medical records could help parents like her keep track of their child's health information and help physicians provide better care. She suggested that new mothers might be a good group to begin using EMRs to compile their babies' medical histories.

The commission's next meeting in April will focus on the provider's role in healthcare IT adoption.